California State Parks

Video Transcript

Carved In Silence

(unabridged version)

NARRATOR: On May 1st, 1937, Mock Ging Sing caught his first glimpse of Gam Saan—Gold Mountain—America. He had left his home and family to find his dream in the New World. It was a modest dream—a job, enough money to send for his family, a home, and a safe place to watch his children grow. It was a dream not unlike that of millions of other immigrants pouring into America's eastern shore.

But Mock did not cross the Atlantic Ocean, he crossed the Pacific, leaving behind the political turmoil and grinding poverty of his native China. No Statue of Liberty welcomed him at the end of his journey. Instead he was taken to the Immigration Station on Angel Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Here he would be detained for ten months. As was Yee Goon Kwan, who was detained for six months, and Lee Puey You for almost two years before she was deported. For them and thousands of others, Angel Island was a prison—a prison where people were confined for only one reason, being Chinese.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days. Fortunately I arrived safely on the American continent. I thought I could land in a few days. How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building? The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take. When my family circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of tears flow.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: When it was time for me to leave, my grandmother saw me off herself. She said, I am seventy-five, I don't know if I will live long enough to see you come home. When I heard that, I felt so bad, my tears just started falling. I felt like throwing down my bags and running straight back to my house. Not come to America. But then I said to myself, 'I've got to think of my future.' So I made up my mind, and I came to this country.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: Well, I saw how hard my brother worked. Just one job, trying to support me and my mother. It was barely enough. Finally I decided to listen to my mother. I would come to America first and then later help my brother and the rest of the family come also. That was what my mother had always wanted. Here there was a future. In China we were just too poor, and there was nothing we could do.

TRANSLATOR FOR YEE GOON KWAN: My life in China was not too bad, since my father was a merchant here. I came because he wanted me to get an education and to help him. But once I got to Angel Island, I felt the treatment was inhumane.

NARRATOR: In America, we call ourselves a nation of immigrants. Our popular history celebrates the ideal of opportunity for all in the great melting pot. But within this history, there is a chapter of shame. A period from 1882 to 1943 when systematic discrimination and exclusion of Chinese people was the law of the land. Much of that chapter was written here, on Angel Island.

Like so many other immigrant groups, it was gold in California that first attracted large numbers of Chinese to America. Then during the nation's continuing westward expansion, the Chinese were seen as a cheap and reliable labor supply. They helped build the railroads, worked in the fields, and developed the commercial fishing industry.

For nearly three decades, the need for manpower kept America's doors open to the Chinese. But in the late 1870s a widespread depression gripped the nation. Intense competition for jobs led to increasing anti-Chinese sentiments. Fueled by the press and by American labor leaders, these sentiments led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The law aimed at Chinese laborers marked the first time in American history that a group was forbidden entry to the United States solely on the basis of race.

So effective were the exclusion laws and subsequent legislation, that Chinese immigration, which had reached forty-thousand in a single year, dwindled to just ten people in 1887. For the Chinese, the open doors had suddenly slammed shut.

The law did make exceptions for a few. Diplomats, merchants, students, teachers and members of their families could still immigrate.

But even this small exempt class was not given the same rights as other immigrants. They, along with idiots, lunatics, and paupers, were denied the ultimate prize of immigration—American citizenship.

America's immigration policies became progressively more restrictive. What began with the Chinese eventually included other groups from Asia, and finally Europeans. But all European immigrants were given the right to citizenship—a right that would be denied to Asians until the mid-twentieth century.

Still, the government's policies could not diminish the shiny appeal of America. Deteriorating political and economic conditions in China made more and more people desperate to escape. But because most Chinese did not fit within the narrow definitions of the exempt class, escape meant finding a way to circumvent America's policy of exclusion.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: I wrote my father and asked him to find a way to bring me over to America. And my father managed to buy me a paper so I could come here.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: Yes, it was a false paper. It cost him sixteen-hundred dollars.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: In my case, I got to come here because there was this girlfriend of my mother's, they are from the same village. She wanted to introduce me to her cousin for marriage. She wanted me to come to America to marry him. So she bought me a false paper.

TRANSLATOR FOR YEE GOON KWAN: My papers were all real. My father's name, everything. I never had to lie or to do anything like that.

NARRATOR: After crossing the Pacific Ocean, Chinese immigrants faced the most difficult part of their long journey—the last mile—the distance separating Angel Island from San Francisco, from America.

The immigrants could not know if they would leave the island in two days or two years. Their ordeal included a rigorous physical examination. But the most intimidating experience was the series of exhaustive interrogations conducted by immigration inspectors. The immigrants' performance in these interrogations would determine their fate.

ACTORS PORTRAYING INSPECTORS: What is your name? How many windows are there in your house? Where are the kitchens? Which is your parents' room? Have you any tablets in your house? Have you any idols in your house? How many feet is your house from the house next door? What is your name? Have you any idols in your house? What is your father's name? Have you any tablets? How many windows are there in your house? Do you have any idols?

Z. B. JACKSON, FORMER INSPECTOR: China, in those years, had no records of births, marriages, death. If they did, they were not available to the people. And that fact, that you couldn't go back to a vital statistics record to determine whether one person was related to another, and of course the existing poverty in China, which would understandably impel any father to want to get his son out of there, one way or another, to a better place to live—that brought about this system of comparing notes, to see if you were convinced that they had actually lived together in China.

[Actor portraying translator asks immigrant, in Chinese, to remove his hat]

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: What is your name?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My name is Si Yung.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many windows are there in your house?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: There are twelve.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many houses in your row?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: There are ten.

Z. B. JACKSON: And our job was to go over every minute detail of the history of an arriving child—where he lived, where he went to school—and compare what he said with what his father said . . .

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Where are the kitchens?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My kitchen is near the small door.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Where does your oldest son sleep?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My oldest son sleeps near the large door.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Where do you sleep?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: I sleep in the second room . . .

NARRATOR: Ironically, a catastrophe created an unexpected opportunity for the Chinese. Virtually all of San Francisco's official archives, including birth records, no longer existed. Anyone could now claim to have been born in the city—a claim that brought instant American citizenship. For hundreds of Chinese immigrants, this was a godsend. Instant citizenship meant that they could now bring their families to join them. And because the American authorities had no way of knowing how large those families really were, a man could claim to have as many children as he wanted to.

This creation of paper children opened the way for a new wave of Chinese immigration. Before long, a complex network developed—a black market dealing in the documents which certified one's status as the son or daughter of a citizen. The papers were expensive, about one-hundred-dollars for each year of age stated on the paper. Poor families sometimes pooled their resources to send their brightest young men to the New World.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: We had some land in China that we used as collateral for a loan. After we got the loan we put down about one-third of that money as deposit for the paper. Then once I landed, my father used his own money and he also borrowed from his friends and relatives and paid off the rest. The debt was cleared the moment I landed.

NARRATOR: The money bought not only the necessary documents, but also a coaching book containing information about the life of the person whose identity an immigrant would assume—details about their villages, families, friends, even pets.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: The man who claimed me as his son, my 'paper father,' he told me that I would be interrogated for sure. He said, 'They will ask many, many questions. What? I don't know. You better memorize the coaching book well. If you don't, you'll make mistakes. And once you make mistakes, it's all over.'

NARRATOR: When the immigrants arrived on the island, families were immediately separated. Husbands from wives and, sometimes, parents from children. No communication would be permitted during their stay.

The first hurdle facing detainees was a physical examination. A procedure that was often difficult because of the unfamiliar practices of Western medicine.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: When the doctor came I had to take off all of my clothes. It was so embarrassing and shameful for me. I didn't really want to let him examine me, but I had no choice. Back in China I never had to take off everything. But it was different here in America. I found it very strange.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: Our daily schedule went something like this: Every morning around six or seven we got up. At eight we had breakfast—bread, butter, jam, and some saltine crackers. That was what we had. Then lunchtime we had rice, we had beef and vegetables all boiled together; sometimes salted fish, sometimes pickled cucumber. The food wasn't good, but since we didn't have anything else, we had to eat it, no matter how bad. At three in the afternoon we had coffee, bread, and crackers, with the usual butter and jam. Nighttime at around five or six, we had our evening meal. After dinner nothing else, and that was what our life was like.

WOMAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: Often at meal time we could hear the men, their footsteps, coming up the stairs. As they walked up, some would call out to their wives loudly, just once or twice. That was how they kept in touch.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: Every night at ten they turned out the lights. There would be a guard posted to watch over us in case we ran away or somehow escaped from the island.

TRANSLATOR READING POETRY: The west wind ruffles my thin, gauze clothing. On the hill sits a tall building with a room of wooden planks. I wish I could travel on a cloud far away and be with my wife and son. When the moonlight shines on me alone, the nights seem even longer. There is no flower beneath my pillow, and my dreams are not sweet.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: As time dragged on, we got more worried, we got more depressed. Then it developed into a kind of agony. It was impossible to rebel against the immigration officials. There was no way for us to relieve our suffering. There was no way for us to forget our troubles. So we had to use the written language to express the frustration and pain inside us.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: Many people wrote poetry, but nobody ever signed his name. There were no signatures at all. I think there must have been eighty or ninety poems. Many were just carved deep into the wood with a knife.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: During one of my more painful moments, I wrote this poem: 'From across the Pacific Ocean to America, I left my village and all my loved ones. Who'd have thought I'd be imprisoned in this wooden barrack? I do not know when I will be set free.'

WOMAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: When I was in China, I didn't know it would be so hard in America. Everybody said that coming to America was like going to heaven. But then there were the interrogations, they were so awful.

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My village is called Do Nam Lee.

Z. B. JACKSON: As with any group of men, there are always some that are more efficient, more competent, perhaps more fair. I don't know of anyone who I would characterize as completely unfair. There were some who were a little more inclined to be roughshod in questioning . . .

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: Two feet tall, one foot wide . . .

Z. B. JACKSON: There is a little facet to questioning persons, particularly those that are timid or afraid, who've never been in this little arena before—your tone of voice.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many houses are in your row?

[Translator speaks in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many feet is your house from the house next door?

[Translator speaks in Chinese, and immigrant responds]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: I do not remember.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many feet?

NARRATOR: Waiting took up most of the time. Waiting to be examined, waiting to be interrogated, again and again. Waiting in fear and frustration, knowing that even the smallest mistake could destroy the dream of America. Worst of all, waiting with uncertainty. As one detainee said, At least in prison you know when you will get out.

NARRATOR: To protest the poor quality of their living conditions, male detainees formed the Angel Island Liberty Association in 1922. Those who had been detained the longest became officers. Mock Ging Sing and Yee Goon Kwan each served as chairmen.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: While we were depressed, we listened to music. We also had a library and we could play mah jong or cards. None of us really had anything. So when we played, we did so for very little money.

NARRATOR: The most important function of the Association's officers was to help smuggle messages to detainees who were having difficulties in their interrogations. The messages were carried back and forth from San Francisco by the Chinese kitchen staff, who could leave the island on their days off.

Then, in Chinatown, they would pick up coaching notes from the relatives of detainees. A small fee would be paid for taking the messages back to the island.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: There were several officers of the organization, about six or seven of them, who always sat together at meals. When notes were smuggled in, the kitchen helpers serving the food might say casually, 'Here is the chicken dish,' or such-and-such a dish. And there would be a paper with the proper answers taped to the bottom of the plate. We would hide the paper and then smuggle it upstairs to the detainee.

TRANSLATOR READING FROM NOTE: Dear brother, The reason why you have not been landed is because you made some mistakes in your testimony. In your call for a new examination, use this new information. If the inspectors ask you questions you cannot answer, say that you cannot remember, but do not give answers at random. Do not be afraid. I promise to find some way to get you landed.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: Everyone was feeling low. We all suffered, emotionally. No one had any energy. We slept all day. So much mental anguish, you know, we cried more than anything else. It was hard. And time went by so slowly. One of the missionaries, a Miss Moore, I think, I don't remember exactly, she used to come once a week and brought us some yarn and material to do knitting and sewing. That helped to break the monotony, a little.

NARRATOR: No visitors were allowed on Angel Island except missionaries. They came to preach or teach English, talk about American customs, and sometimes provide entertainment. One of the most dedicated was Deaconess Katharine Maurer, who came to be known as the Angel of Angel Island.

REVEREND EDWAR LEE: When I was looking for a job, she asked me if I would like to work as an interpreter on Angel Island. And since I couldn't find any other work, I said, 'Yes, I will give it a try.' In those days, there is not a ghost of a chance of a Chinese being an inspector, but here I have a masters degree from the University of California, and the people that are in authority didn't even have a college education. We know that the immigration law is unfair in many instances. But still, we didn't get them to come to this country, they wanted to come to this country, and they know what they have to put up with.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Which is your parents' room?

REVEREND EDWAR LEE: One of my experiences of the trickiness of these questions by inspectors is the case in which two boys, who came in as applicants, claimed to be brothers living in the same house . . .

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: I thought your brother said you had a dog in the house.

[Translator speaks in Chinese, and immigrant responds]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: No.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Are you sure there isn't a dog?

[Translator speaks in Chinese, and immigrant responds]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: There used to be one, but when they came to the United States, they killed it and ate it.

Z. B. JACKSON: You know, we have two sons, and after I had been with Immigration for a while, the two boys lived in the same room, slept in the same room, and they were six years apart. And just as an experiment I got them one time and I got them outside and I asked them, How many windows are in your room? What type is the chandelier and where is the switch located? And, do you know, they would have failed. They didn't agree on the number of windows in their room. They didn't agree on the location of the furniture in their room, which is a small room. You're quite right, it was difficult, no matter how genuine the relationship was between the father here and the child coming in. You still had to run this gauntlet and you had to answer these questions and it was difficult to remember, for anyone.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Yee Goon Kwan. Born June 5th, 1920. Now the present applicant is claimed to be the fourth son of Yee Yung Pang. In my opinion, the evidence of record does not satisfactorily establish the applicant is the son of Yee Yung Pang's claim. And it would appear that this visa was obtained by misrepresentation and should not be considered a valid visa. Commander Cole?

ACTOR PORTRAYING COMMANDER COLE: I second the motion.

FIRST ACTOR: Commander Walsh? . . .

TRANSLATOR READING POETRY: The ocean encircles a lone peak. Rough terrain surrounds this prison. There are few birds flying over the cold hills. The wild goose messenger cannot find its way. I have been detained, and obstacles have been put in my way for half a year. Now that I must return to my country, I have toiled like a *jingwei* bird in vain.

NARRATOR: Appeals could be made if the original application were denied, and the majority of them were successful. In case after case, the review board in Washington, D.C., found the questioning to have been unfair.

OLD-TIME RADIO ANNOUNCER VOICE: This is the voice of America, one of the United Nations. And today President Roosevelt has just asked Congress to repeal the Chinese

Exclusion Act, which keeps Chinese nationals from emigrating to the United States. The President said repeal of the Act would correct a historic mistake and would be further proof of the friendship of the United States towards China.

NARRATOR: On December 17th, 1943, Congress voted to repeal the Chinese exclusion laws. The repeal was strictly a political decision, motivated by America's alliance with China in the war against Japan. But even as allies, only a token one-hundred-and-five Chinese were allowed to enter the United States each year. The quota for England, another ally, was sixty-six-thousand.

However, with repeal came citizenship. Chinese immigrants were finally given the right to become naturalized citizens. They could vote, serve on juries, and qualify for government jobs. They could participate fully in the social, political, and economic life of their adopted country. Finally they could begin to live as Americans.

But it would take more than repeal of the laws to undo the damage exclusion had caused. Because of exclusion, families were separated, preventing the normal growth of traditional family structures. Instead, generations of Chinese men were relegated to bachelor societies.

Because of exclusion, the Chinese formed geographic, social, and cultural ghettos—Chinatowns. Here they were cutoff from the mainstream of American life. There was little opportunity to acquire the skills of acculturation, to learn a new and difficult language, or to be exposed to the ways of their new country.

Because of exclusion, succeeding generations of Chinese Americans were robbed of their personal and cultural histories. Even today detainees are reluctant to speak of their experience, reluctant to pass on a legacy that is filled with humiliation and fear. And because of exclusion, an entire race of immigrants was sent an unmistakable message—You are not wanted; you do not belong here. That message led to the most damaging consequence of all—a pervasive mistrust of the larger community, of white America.

But within the legacy of exclusion there is also pride and ultimately a sense of victory. For while it is clear that generations of Chinese immigrants were victimized by exclusion, they refused to be victims. They refused to give up their dreams of Gold Mountain. They persevered in their struggle to become Americans. For some the struggle took longer than for others. Lee Puey You was detained on Angel Island for twenty months. Then after three appeals, she was deported.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: During my trip back to China on the boat, my heart was filled with such pain. It hurt so much that I finally had to put some rice, some hot rice, against my chest to ease the pain inside. The anguish that I had suffered is more than anyone could bear. I can't begin to describe it. Then all of the sudden, I had this dream. My appeal was successful. It was like a message from God. Then my heart was at peace. So that is my story, from start to finish. It took me fourteen years to come back to America, fourteen long, long years.

NARRATOR: Lee Puey You raised five children and worked with her husband in their neighborhood grocery store in San Francisco. There was only one way for Mock Ging Sing to come to America, as a paper son. It cost him his real name and ten months on Angel Island.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: My stay on Angel Island as a detainee did not affect my future. But it did affect my way of thinking. It made me aware of racial discrimination and started me thinking how we Chinese could overcome this kind of injustice in the future.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: In other words, it did not make me bitter or discouraged. I was still able to build a future for myself.

NARRATOR: Mock Ging Sing became a successful flower grower in San Jose, where he and his wife brought up seven children. Yee Goon Kwan was not a paper son, but the real son of a merchant. Still, he was nearly deported and spent six months on Angel Island.

TRANSLATOR FOR YEE GOON KWAN: It was my experience on Angel Island that makes me feel the way I do—that we in the Chinese community should not be working so hard to make money. We should be working to fight racial discrimination. Money is not really that important.

NARRATOR: Reunited with his wife after a fourteen-year separation, Yee Goon Kwan became a political activist, a restaurant worker, and grocer. He and his wife have four children and five grandchildren.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: When I got back to Angel Island in 1976, I could see that things were a lot different. It used to be an Immigration Station, a prison. And now it's a park, like paradise.

When I entered the barracks, I saw that many of the poems on the walls had disappeared. Many had been scratched out or marked over. So I decided to write a poem to express my feelings. 'On Revisiting Angel Island: I cannot forget my imprisonment in the wooden building. The writing on the wall terrifies me. Returning here after forty-four years, I seek out poems now incomplete . . .' But still, I remember—memories of sadness, of anger, frustration, memories we have kept from our children. The memories are etched in my bones, in my heart. Today, we can stand proud as Chinese Americans, but I will never forget what happened here. Where our pain was carved in silence.

Running Time: 46 minutes